DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 011 UD 021 107

AUTHOR Shapiro, Victor W.
TITLE How American History Textbooks View the Caribbean.
PUB DATE 17 Jul 80
NOTE 18p.: Not available in paper copy due to reproduction quality of original document. Paper presented at the Association of Caribbean Studies Conference (Nassau, Bahamas, July 17, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes: *Black History: Colonialism: Foreign Countries: *Historiography: *History Textbooks: *International Relations: Slavery: *United States History
IDENTIFIERS Caribbean: *Caribbean History: United States

ABSTRACT

This paper examines: (1) the extent to which recently published textbooks used in United States history survey courses reflect a revised view of the historical relationship between the Caribbean region and the United States: and (2) whether recent shifts in research emphases and methodological expansions in the field of American history have brought about significant change in traditional views of the scope, impact, and importance of the Caribbean region upon the course of United States history. Considered is the content of works published before and after 1965. Interpretive materials by leading United States historians are compared and contrasted with works by historians and social scientists who have written specialized texts on the Caribbean region and its people. Some of the topics scrutinized include: the discovery and settlement of America: mercantilism and incipient capitalism: the Seven Years War: the American Revolution: the Haitian Revolution: the U.S. Civil War: various issues related to slavery and manumission: American imperialism: the Spanish American War: the World Wars: Caribbean nationalism and regionalism: and current United States-Caribbean relations. It is posited that American historians see commonalities of historical experience between the United States and the Caribbean only when they coincide with accepted views of what is deemed to be American, and disappear when they exceed the historians' current depth of vision into the American experience. (Author/GC)

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How American History Textbooks View the Caribbean*

by

Victor W. Shapiro
Brooklyn College of CUNY

This paper is a distillation of an ongoing research study undertaken to determine the extent to which recently published textbooks used in United States history survey courses on the college level reflect a revised view of the historical relationship between the Caribbean region and the United States. The search for reevaluation and revision of traditional viewpoints focuses upon the content and pattern of presentation in textbooks published before and after 1965.[1] Texts examined include those written, edited or contributed to by many of the United States' most eminent historians, such as Bernard Bailyn, George Billias, Merle Curti , Richard Current, John Hope Franklin, Eugene Genovese, Gerald Grob, Richard Hofstader, Oscar Handlin, Michael Kammen, Arthur Link, Forrest McDonald, Samuel Eliot Morison, Page Smith, Howard Zinn, and others.[2] Interpretive and narrative materials presented by these historians have been compared and contrasted with works by such historians and social scientists as Eric Williams, Franklin Knight and David Lowenthal, who have written specialized textbooks on the Caribbean region and its people.[3]

Topics scrutinized for evidence of change in interpretation and degree of perceived importance include: The discovery, exploration and settlement of insular and continental America; mercantilism and incipient capitalism in the New World; the Seven Years War; the American and Haitian revolutions;

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*Presented to the Association of Caribbean Studies, Nassau, Bahamas, July 17, 1980.

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staple economics; capitalism and slavery; British West Indian manumission and its impact upon slavery in the southern United States; the Webster-Ashburton treaty and the slave trade; the role of the Caribbean region in the Civil War; American imperialism in the Caribbean; the Spanish-American War; the Caribbean region and the two world wars; the impact of American policy upon Caribbean nationalism and regionalism and vice versa; and current United States-Caribbean relations.[4]

For the purposes of the study, the terms 'Caribbean' and 'West Indies' are not interchangeable. Stress is placed upon viewing the Caribbean as more than a geographic or political expression but rather a cultural entity, and one stressing "that the sum of common experiences and understandings. . . outweigh the territorial and insular differences or peculiarities."[5] Thus, "to speak therefore of Haitian, Jamaican, Cuban, or Caribbean characteristics should not be to speak of them as mutually exclusive; the first are merely variations or components of the last."[6] As Franklin W. Knight further states:

> All the societies of the Caribbean share an identifiable Weltanschauung, despite superficial divisions that are apparent. The difference in belief, values, and attitudes of the Trinidadian and the Guyanese is perhaps no greater than that between the English and the Welsh, or the Castilian and the Andalucian. Moreover, the Caribbean peoples, with their distinctive artificial societies, common history, and common problems, seem to have more in common than the Texan and the New Yorker, or the Mayan Indian and the cosmopolite of Mexico City do in their respective nations of the United States and Mexico.[7]

The term 'West Indies' is more restrictive. As generally understood, it excludes countries and their inhabitants where Spanish background and culture predominate, notably Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.[8]

As such, this definition ignores the many affinities these nations have with their non-Hispanic neighbors; similarities which Knight finds ultimately of great import, an insight no universally shared.[9]

To judge by the number of pages devoted to events occuring in the region now broadly defined as encompassing the Caribbean by writers of textbook histories of the United States, it would appear that an inescapable (but nonetheless erroneous) conclusion would be that American historians fully appreciate the profound significance that the Caribbean has had in shaping the destiny of the "world's first new nation."[10] Furthermore, in the descriptions and analyses of a blizzard of events from Columbus' first landfall to Castro's last peroration, it would be expected that not only would a clear picture be presented of how these events shaped the history of the United States, but, with equal clarity, the manner in which they influenced the historical development of the nations of the Caribbean as well. And if this expectation appeared to be too ambitious for what are merely textbooks, then a more modest but reasonable hope would be that the presentation give a clear perception of the Caribbean region geographically and culturally, and some knowledge of its political evolution and its people, seen not only from a Euro-American point of view, but through the eyes of Caribbean scholars, historians, and writers as well.

Certainly this attention to the people of the Caribbean region should be found in the newer textbooks published since 1965, since its inclusion would fit in comfortably with the current trend to 'socialize' United States history.[11] It might be argued that the same impetus that prodded historians to discover the contributions of long-neglected racial and ethnic groups and

to examine the roles of women, the family, children, immigrants and non-conformists, might have also led to a closer examination of ways to minimize interstices between United States history and the history of a regional geographically proximate and sharing a common colonial heritage.

If one posits that American historians, though reluctant to give up the notion of the uniqueness of United States history in favor of one that searches for common experiences not only within a Euro-American matrix but in other geographic and cultural contexts as well, the study by necessity must attempt to determine whether recent shifts in research emphases and methodological expansions have brought about any significant change in traditional views of the scope, impact and importance of events that occurred in the Caribbean had upon the course of United States history. Whether as a result of geographic proximity, imperial design or mentality, common western European colonial origins, or a new awareness of the broad scope of America's ethnic origins, is the Caribbean region now perceived as more totally within the American mainstream? And is there an attempt to view or judge events of common interest and impact from a Caribbean as well as the point of view of the United States? If the historian can only see the ties and commonalities most vividly when they coincide with accepted views, values, and judgments deemed to be, a priori, 'American', less obvious nexus will dim and fade from view when they run contrary to or exceed the historian's current depth of vision. Then, what has been viewed as complementary experiences which serve to bind the United States to another 'America' become the fantastical happenings in a 'third world' -- colorful, bizarre, sometimes frightening, but essentially tributary to the main stream of history.

It should be noted that United States history is a discipline that has metamorphosed from one emphasizing institution, events, politics and ideas to one preoccupied with and recognizing "the diversity of the population in the American past."[12] Infusions from the social sciences have been sought and adapted. A new emphasis on the social concerns of the poor, oppressed and powerless, more often than not utilizing statistical and other techniques of quantification, has led to the emergence of social history as the "most prominent subfield within the discipline."[13] In the field of diplomatic or international history, the emphasis has shifted from government personalities to governmental elites. Paradoxically, whereas social historians focus upon the underclasses, historians of international history scrutinize "the propertied, the powerful and the well-known".[14]

There has also been a dimunition of interest in the concept of national character, an idea which contained the germinating seed of 'consensus' history. Rather than stressing its uniqueness, latest emphasis has stressed the 'unexceptionality' of United States history, to some degree as the result of the efforts of Marxist historians such as Eugene Genovese who have always seen the United States as falling within the purview of traditional European historical analysis.[15] Concomitantly, a new stress upon conflict within American society has emerged and with it, a return to respectability of 'advocacy history'. Comparative history, too, has emerged from the academic equivalent of Caliban's Cave, but with a penchant to seek what is different as well as similar in the parallel developments under study.

What do these changes mean in terms of how American historians will ultimately view or review the Caribbean region? Certainly, the academic

directions embarked upon are promising. As greater and greater numbers of Caribbeans emigrate to the United States, their presence should prove an irrestible and fertile field of inquiry for the social historian. So too, renewed interest in comparative history and the shift in emphasis in diplimatic history should make the Caribbean a prime target for historical re-examination, as the region's history is replete with contrasting yet kindred elements to those underpinning the United States experience. One need go no further than the impact of race, class, and the democratic ideal upon the two histories to uncover obvious but still unsatisfactorily investigated areas of study.[16] However, two caveats: First, what appears to be the reasonable certainty that the Caribbean region and its people will gain greater attention from American historians as a result of current academic changes in the discipline, gives no assurance that the same will occur in United States history textbooks. All too often, the same scholar who rushes to present new research or join in scholarly debate with colleagues, will rarely think to include present findings in the textbook revision being worked upon at the same time.[17] Second, the changes being wrought in the field of United States history have not as yet taken hold sufficiently for even those in the field who actively support the current direction to predict with any sanguinity where the discipline will be in the near future. Until historians themselves are certain that the present center will hold, it would be foolish for those on the fringes of the discipline to take quantum leaps and attempt to forecast such specifics as how United States historians will be predisposed toward a particular region and its history, in this case, the Caribbean, in what is an uncertain future.

Two other factors bear upon an understanding of why it has been so difficult to present a balanced yet definitive view of the Caribbean region in United States history textbooks. First, the textbook itself as a generic phenomenon, intrudes upon what would appear to be a clear cause and effect relationship between transference of new ideas and precepts from research monograph to survey course textbook. Though United States historians look with scholarly disdain upon survey textbooks in their discipline even as they write them, these hornbooks of history reflect our society socially and culturally, and should be taken seriously. This is particularly true since survey texts are conservative by their very nature and as such, are the last to reflect the results of current research. Nowhere is this more apparent than with respect to research dealing with a region such as the Caribbean, an area which has yet to seize center stage either in the minds of the American people or in the ruminations of American historians and social scientists. For example, an event of supreme significance in Caribbean history, the Haitian revolution is almost ignored in the textbooks under study. It is as if Caribbeans are viewed as incapable of fashioning either a political innovation, or revolution, no matter how lofty in its purpose or tragic in its consequence, as in the case of Toussaint L'Ouverture's revolution in the name of the Haitian people. For writers such as Eric Williams, the Haitian revolution was a revolution from below, and its tragedy was not in its conception, but in its aftermath when the commercial giants, Europe and the United States systematically punished the people of Haiti for their initiative through a concerted policy of economic discrimination, neglect,

and exploitation.[18] Through freedom, Haiti became impoverished. From Williams' point of view, the basis of Euro-American reaction to the Haitian revolution was not as much racial as economic. By setting in motion an anti-slavery impetus 'before its time', the Haitian revolutionaries accelerated the reordering of commercial forces, much to the chagrin and lasting emnity of the planter/mercantilists.[19]

Whereas the American revolution dealt a crushing blow to colonialism, it was the Haitian explosion that struck a telling blow at both colonialism and slavery. At the same time, one seeks social causations for the American revolution and strains to find them, they are manifestly apparent in the Haitian revolution. Yet, there has been little recognition of the significance of the Haitian revolution as an historical event in the texbooks under study. Was it because of how bloody or insignificant the event was that compelled textbook writers to reduce the first modern social revolution in the Americas to one or two lines or perhaps a paragraph, if any space at all, in chapters dealing with the American revolution and its aftermath? Was it because the revolution ultimately failed in the sense that "out of the richest colony in the world, the rebels created the poorest republic"?[20] Was it because its result "was to put the slave owners of the rest of the Americas on their watch," and thus inhibit rather than accelerate North American emancipation"?[21] Surely, the excesses of the French Terror equalled those that occurred in Saint-Domingue, and was not Bolivar's failure far more sweeping than Toussaint's? Or was it race not revolution that dominated conventional wisdom in order to downplay the Haitian glory and ignore the Haitian tragedy? Perhaps this was understood from the beginning by the Haitian revolutionaries. Hadn't Dessalines,

in an act of defiance and racial consciousness, struck white from the tricolor to create the Haitian flag?[22] The depth of the Haitian trauma can still be seen today in the symbolic use of Toussaint as the exemplification of 'Négritude',[23] and in such recent mutterings as Hugh Thomas' tortuous defense of the European enslavement and genocidal activities in the New World on the implausible grounds that had not the Europeans enslaved the region, the Caribs might well have canibalized all its inhabitants.[24] Or in a less bizarre manner but with perhaps greater condescension, in the Durants' assessment that Toussaint governed well "but found it difficult to restore productive order among liberated Negroes, who preferred the leisurely ways that seem dictated by the heat."[25] And no less repugnant are textbook sobriquets referring to Toussaint as a "Black Napoleon."[26] What other historical figure has been characterized as the racial counterpart of his betrayer and murderer? Or, for that matter, eulogized by a caption describing his (Toussaint's) death as one which took place. . . "in a chilly dungeon in France, where he coughed his life away."[27]

A second factor is that like its United States counterpart, the discipline of Caribbean history is itself in a state of flux. Whereas a decade ago, predominant writings about the region focused mainly on individual countries or cultural and social sub-groups and almost always took a Euro-American perspective, major works have more recently appeared which have attempted to present the region as, in so far as possible, an integrated whole. Historians such as Eric Williams and Franklin W. Knight have written histories of the region seeking to evoke a regional rather than an island by island, country by country self-consciousness. More recent specialized

studies have begun to view the historical development of the region for its own sake and not as a lunar reflection of a Euro-American sun. The emergence of Caribbean studies as a legitimate academic discipline in its own right, evolving out of the combined need for self-expression and as a necessary academic pursuit by scholars of all regions, nations and backgrounds is a recent phenomena, and its impact is now being felt with greater force. In the words of V.S. Naipaul:

> "To be a colonial was to know a kind of security; it was to inhabit a fixed world...But in the new world I felt that ground move below me. The new politics, the curious reliance of men on institutions they were working to undermine, the simplicity of beliefs and the hideous simplicity of actions, the corruption of causes, half-made societies that seemed doomed to remain half-made: these were the things that began to pre-occupy me."28

The ever-growing body of research about and interest in the Caribbean region and its people is quiet evidence that there is a growing awareness in the academic community of historians and social scientists that the pre-occupations of one of the Caribbean's and world's pre-eminent writers are properly the concerns of us all.

NOTES

1. As Frances Fitzgerald points out in America Revised,"it takes about five years or more to get a textbook out, from start to finish." (p. 3) As the crisis in American historiography gained legitimacy and momentum in the early 1960's, the date 1965 seemed ideal to serve as a watershed between 'old' and 'new' texts.

2. See bibliography.

3. See bibliography.

4. Preliminary data indicate that the texts under study tend to select similar topics for discussion, and to a significant degree. Interestingly, an event of palpable significance such as the British conquest of Havana, was never cited although events of peripheral importance such as the Isle of Cows incident involving President Lincoln did appear in a few instances.

5. Franklin W. Knight, The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.x.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, p.xi.

8. David Lowenthal, West Indian Societies, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 3.

9. Ibid.

10. Each of the texts under study had multiple references and many pages devoted to events taking place in the Caribbean region. Few had any reference to or discussion of the people of the region, with the possible exception of the Arawak and Caribs. For all practical purposes, the people who have been the inhabitants of the Caribbean region are literally invisible, in much the same manner as American Blacks were excluded from secondary school texts until recently (Fitzgerald, p. 84). However, in the case of Caribbean peoples, the pattern of exclusion persists in even the most recently published texts on the college level.

11. Carl N. Degler, "Remaking American History," The Journal of American History, Vol. 67, No. 1, June 1980, p. 9.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid, p. 10.

14. Ibid, p. 12.

15. Ibid., pp. 17-18. See also Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "The Slave Economics in Political Perspective," The Journal of American History, vol. 66, No. 1, June 1979, pp. 7-23.

16. Efforts in comparative history, particularly with respect to the United States, Caribbean and South American patterns of slavery, have been largely disappointing in the past. Witness Gilbert Freyre's benign view of slavery in Northern Brazil and the Elkins-Tanenbaum thesis. For a new try at a synthesis, see Pete Daniel, "The Metamorphosis of Slavery," American Historical Review, vol. 66, No. 1, June 1979, pp. 88-99.

17. Page Smith believes texts reflect little of the philosophy or pet theories of the historians who write them.

18. Eric Williams, From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean from 1492-1969, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 237-279.

19. Ibid.

20. Hugh Thomas, A History of the World, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 240-241.

21. Ibid., p. 241. This reasoning is much like blaming the victim for resisting the crime, the oppressed the oppression. It is as if one could reason that had there been no revolt of the gladiators, there would have been no need for the Roman Republic to crucify thousands in retribution; had there been no revolt led by Wat Tyler, then there would have been no need to further repress the English peasantry; no heresy, no inquisition. The argument reduces itself to absurdity.

22. Willifred Feuser, "Leon Damas; A Critical Exploration," Journal of Caribbean Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 1980, p. 22.

23. Barbara C. Dease, "Cesaire's Concept of Négritude in Cahier D'Un Retour Au Pays Natal," Journal of Caribbean Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 1980, pp. 42-43.

24. Hugh Thomas, op.cit., pp. 241-242.

25. Will and Ariel Durant, The Age of Napoleon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), pp. 177-178.

26. Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, The American Pageant, 6th edition, Vol. 1, (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1979), p. 171.

27. V.S. Naipaul, "Conrad's Darkness," The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad, (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 216.

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